

VEHICLE STRUCTURE FOR PEDESTRIAN PROTECTION

Field of the Invention

[0001] This invention relates to a vehicle structure for protecting a pedestrian.

Background of the Invention

[0002] A vehicle body panel assembly typically comprises an outer skin and an inner skin. The outer skin serves as the exterior surface of the vehicle while the inner skin is spaced from the outer skin and is located toward the interior of the vehicle. For many body panel assemblies steel structures are sandwiched between the outer skin and the inner skin to provide a protective framework surrounding the passenger compartment to protect vehicle occupants in the event of an accident. In addition, the inner skin may be very hard to provide support for the body panel assembly.

[0003] Recently, manufacturers have directed their attention to developing safety systems to prevent injury to a pedestrian hit by a vehicle. Current body panel assemblies raise concerns about injury to pedestrians due to the hardened structures of these assemblies. Manufacturers have developed vehicle exterior airbag systems to cushion the impact of a pedestrian against these panel assemblies. These airbag systems add significant cost to the vehicle and also require a significant amount of space within the vehicle. They also require time to deploy in an accident and may obstruct the view of the driver of the vehicle following deployment.

[0004] The hood of a vehicle presents a particular design challenge. The hood not only has hard support structures but further covers unyielding engine components that may present a hard point for injury in the event of a front end accident with a pedestrian. Moreover, there is very little room under the hood to accommodate pedestrian protection systems.

[0005] A need therefore exists for an inexpensive body panel assembly that reduces the severity of a pedestrian injury in the event of an accident without the need for an external airbag system.

Summary of the Invention

[0006] The inventive body panel assembly comprises an outer skin and an inner skin spaced from the outer skin. The outer skin serves as the exterior surface for a vehicle. In contrast to existing body panel assemblies, the inventive body panel assembly has an energy absorbing body spaced between the outer skin panel and a hard point of the vehicle. Consequently, an impact of a pedestrian on the body panel assembly is cushioned by the energy absorbing body.

[0007] A vehicle hood of the inventive design has an outer skin and an inner skin spaced from the outer skin. A cavity is formed between the outer skin and the inner skin. The energy absorbing body may be received in the cavity. This design permits the energy absorbing body to be placed within the vehicle hood without taking up space under the hood and at very little cost.

[0008] The energy absorbing body may be a foam block or a hollow body, such as a fluid reservoir for antifreeze or windshield wiper fluid. The energy absorbing body may be further spaced from other energy absorbing bodies.

[0009] Thus, the outer skin is spaced from an inner skin to form a vehicle body panel. Hard points on the vehicle are located relative to the vehicle body panel. Energy absorbing bodies are then placed between the outer skin and the vehicle hard point.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0010] The various features and advantages of this invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the following detailed description of the currently preferred embodiment.

[0011] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a vehicle employing the inventive vehicle body panel, here a hood.

[0012] Figure 2 is a cross-sectional view of the hood of Figure 1, highlighting the location of energy absorbing bodies.

[0013] Figure 3 illustrates an alternative design embodying the invention, highlighting cavities within the inventive vehicle body panel to receive energy absorbing bodies.

[0014] Figure 4 is a cross-sectional view of the alternative design of Figure 3, showing placement of energy absorbing body over an engine hard point.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0015] As used herein and in the claim terms describing locations such as “above”, “below”, “forward”, “rearward” and so forth are understood to be in relation to a motor vehicle that is sitting upright.

[0016] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a vehicle body panel assembly 14 on a vehicle 10. As shown, the vehicle body panel assembly 14 is a vehicle hood placed over an engine 34 and having an outer skin panel 18, which forms the exterior surface for the vehicle 10. The inner skin panel 22 is spaced from the outer skin panel 18. In contrast to existing vehicle body panel assemblies, the inventive vehicle body panel assembly 14 has energy absorbing bodies 24 located between the outer skin panel 18 and hard points 30 of vehicle 10. In this way, a pedestrian hitting the vehicle body panel assembly 14 would have his impact against hard points 30 cushioned by the energy absorbing bodies 24. As used herein and in the claims a “hard point” of a vehicle comprises a hard vehicle component that is located interior of a vehicle body panel, including the hood, and is so close to the vehicle body panel that if a pedestrian impacts the vehicle body panel it is likely that the vehicle body panel will be deformed sufficiently that the body panel will impact the vehicle component and the pedestrian will also effectively impact the vehicle component.

[0017] Figure 2 illustrates the arrangement of the energy absorbing bodies 24 within the vehicle body assembly 14. In this design, the outer skin panel 18 is spaced from the inner skin panel 22. The inner skin panel 22 may be the hood structure for vehicle 10. A cavity 26 is formed between the outer skin panel 18 and the inner skin panel 22. Energy absorbing bodies are sandwiched between the outer skin panel 18 and the inner skin panel 22 and are located over the hard points 30 of the engine 34. The energy absorbing bodies 24 may be foam blocks such as STYROFOAM™ or HEXCELL™ or other energy absorbing material. The energy absorbing body 24 may also be

hollow bodies, such as fluid reservoirs for windshield wiper or antifreeze fluid. The location under the hood of these existing reservoirs facilitates their use as energy absorbing bodies. Moreover, their use in this way is space saving.

[0018] Figure 3 illustrates an alternative design for vehicle body panel assembly. Here a vehicle body panel assembly 32 is shown upside down with an outer skin panel 18 on the bottom and inner skin panel 22 on top. Spaced into the inner skin panel 22 are holes 40 to receive an energy absorbing body, such as a fluid reservoir 38 as shown in Figure 4.

[0019] Figure 4 illustrates that the fluid reservoir 38 as well as the holes 40 may be located over hard point 30 of the engine 34. By placing the fluid reservoir 38 above a hard point 30, this particular region of the vehicle body panel assembly 32 is cushioned for potential pedestrian impact. Moreover, this design permits the placement of energy absorbing bodies without an increase of width of the vehicle body panel assembly 14.

[0020] The aforementioned description is exemplary rather than limiting. Many modifications and variations of the present invention are possible in light of the above teachings. The preferred embodiments of this invention have been disclosed. However, one of ordinary skill in the art would recognize that certain modifications would come within the scope of this invention. Hence, within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may be practiced otherwise than as specifically described. For this reason the following claims should be studied to determine the true scope and content of this invention.